

REST

Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 11:28-30

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

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Years ago, the Canadian singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell wrote a song about a child who was delighted by dragonflies and amazed by the world around him, but who grew impatient as he got older and wanted the pace to quicken. It was one of the songs I sang to my children at night when they were young and when I could sing. “The Circle Game” spoke of our being “captives on a carousel of time,” unable to return and relive the days behind us as the years begin to increase their speed. In the third verse of the song, Mitchell sang:

Sixteen springs and sixteen summers gone now,
Cartwheels turn to car wheels through the town;
and they tell him, “Take your time; it won’t be long now
till you drag your feet to slow the circles down.”¹

It’s true, isn’t it? Every year we live, life seems to increase its pace. Long true, it seems even more apt in our time, when hurry has become the standard operating speed of our culture. That’s the observation of my pastor-friend Leanne Pearce Reed, who says the universal lament of our time is *I am so busy*.² She says:

We say it all the time. *Crazybusy*, we say, as if it were one word. And so we hurry through our days. We hurry because people depend on us. We hurry because we want to honor the commitments we have made. We hurry because we want to fit it all in. *I am so busy*, we say, as we hurry.

Overwhelmed by the demands and obligations in our lives, we do our best to manage time. We think of it as something we can control.... [Says Reed,] I used to love the ritual of filling in a fresh new calendar, the gleaming pages full of promise. Now, of course, my calendars are all online, color-coded, to keep the various members of the family in the right place at the right time. With our calendars ... all our synchronizing devices, we love to feel in control, to feel like we have a handle on time.

And yet sometimes, in the midst of the hurry, beneath the competent face we present the world, doubt creeps in. We sense that something is wrong with our relationship with time, that for all our organization and frenetic activity, we are missing something vital. We wonder if the values we profess are really the values we embody in our lives as we rush about. We wonder, when in the hurry to prepare a dinner, we realize we haven’t heard a word our child was saying. We wonder, when we have to reschedule a visit to an aging parent again and consider how many more visits we might get.... We wonder, when we realize we have no idea of the phase of the moon or whether the last leaves have

¹ If you don’t know the song, there is a recording of Mitchell singing it at Carnegie Hall in 1972.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5HXT0bn7QY>

² Leanne Pearce Reed, in a paper presented to the January 2013 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville, Kentucky.

fallen from the trees. In such moments, we feel the gap between the values we profess – loving our family, reaching out to our neighbors, caring for creation – and the constant motion [and hurry] of our everyday lives.

Beneath our busyness, this doubt and wonder signal a longing for rest, a longing placed within us by our creator, who built a rhythm of work and rest into the very order of creation. The fourth commandment tells us to keep the Sabbath, [a command] intended not as a burden, but as a gift. Sabbath rest is a gift that helps us [find] a different relationship with time; it helps us to understand and live into time as a gift from God.³

I fear in our day that we are simply too wired, too reachable, too connected to be able to understand time in such a way. We have forgotten Gandhi's wise counsel that "there is more to life than increasing its speed." I wonder if the only way to reclaim the gift of time is for something to shock us out of our routines. A woman who battled cancer for years said,

I can tell who's in the waiting room with cancer and who's healthy and just dealing [with a loved one's appointment...]. The people with cancer are the ones waiting there patiently. It's kind of peaceful. It's always the healthy people who come running in or who start tapping their feet or griping to the receptionist. We're the ones whose time may be short. But they're the ones who act like it.⁴

Yet even for the healthy ones, it need not be so. We don't have to wait for such a scare to begin to value time and rest. Indeed, we know the need to honor time and rest in our very bones. And for us gathered here today, we know such need is part of a deeper understanding of who and whose we are. The Christian faith has long stressed the importance of Sabbath practice as one way to keep our lives whole and balanced and good. The Church has long valued a healthy rhythm of work and rest. It's not *knowing* what is right and good and of value; it is the *doing* of it that is hard, caught as we are on this "carousel of time."

Remember the Sabbath day, says the commandment. *Remember* the Sabbath day. The assumption behind the command is that we will forget, and history has proven that, given enough time, we will *forget*.⁵ And when we do, we forget not only the command, but also its inherent promise of a day of interstitial serenity, rest and re-focusing. It is a promise echoed in the words of Jesus from Matthew that we read a few minutes ago: "Come to me, all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

That is what Jesus offers, and he offers it to all who will align their lives with his. The promise still stands, friends. And goodness we need it. Some years ago, my Lutheran colleague Barbara Lundblad spoke of that need, contrasting her life here in New York with her life growing up on a farm, where her days were full of work, but where she also learned the importance of fallow times. She said,

³ Leanne Peace Reed cf. note 2.

⁴ Mary Ann McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experience with Holy Time*, St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2012, 56.

⁵ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in our Busy Lives*. New York, Bantam Books, 1999, 6. Thanks to Leanne Pearce Reed for the citation. Italics mine.

There was a time when farmers worked from sunrise to sundown. Now it's possible for farmers to work long after sunset, their tractor lights beaming out across the dark fields. I look up at office buildings in New York City, their lights aglow long after quitting time. Don't get me wrong: I don't want to go back to the days of wringer washing machines or milking cows by hand. But I also know that something strange has happened in our lifetime. The technology that has freed our time has also *filled* our time. Now we can send an e-mail message [or read about the latest outrage from Washington] at one in the morning or receive a [text before the sun rises.] New Yorkers used to walk to lunch, looking around at the crowds or the sky; now people walk to lunch talking [or checking email] on their phones. What does a lunch break mean if you're doing business while you're walking? [All this technology, and we're like] chickens in their cages.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” said Jesus, “and I will give you rest.” Your burdens may be no heavier than a cell phone, your physical labor no more demanding than pushing buttons on your washer/dryer, but you know what it is to long for rest.... What Jesus means by rest is more than sleep. It is more than a break activity. It is the rest St. Augustine had in mind when he said, “O God, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” But our days are often [frantic]; we remain restless even when we manage to take time off.⁶

So Jesus says, “Come to me...come to me... and I will give you rest.” What a gracious promise! I should note, as does New Testament scholar Beth Johnson, that though this message is for all who are weary, Jesus especially addressed a particular group. Johnson notes that:

The religious leaders in Matthew's story are ... complicit with the Roman rulers in maintaining the imperial system. The common people labor wearily under Roman occupation, in which the ruling elite secure wealth, status, and power at the expense of the lowly. Jesus rejects this social order as contrary to God's will: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant... just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (20:25-28).

To all those laboring under harsh religious and political systems, Jesus says, “Come to me... and I will give you rest.” Rest [is not just physical rest. It is also] an image of salvation, of what will be when the world is finally ordered according to God's purposes and enjoys its full and complete Sabbath. In promising “rest,” Jesus promises life under God's reign in the new world that he is bringing into being.⁷

Jesus invites us all, and especially those who are so oppressed, “Come to me...and I will give you rest.” Says Beth Johnson,

⁶ Barbara K. Lundblad, “I Will Give You Rest,” *Day 1* sermon, July 04, 1999.

⁷ Elisabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30,” http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=970, accessed June 24, 2013.

Jesus [says] further: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (11:29-30). The yoke was a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression, and subjugation.... But “yoke” was also used metaphorically with positive connotations, as in the invitation to wisdom ... and as a rabbinic metaphor for the difficult but joyous task of obedience to Torah.

What is the yoke Jesus offers? [Perhaps] it is his teaching, his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. He invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but is “gentle and humble in heart.” To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God’s kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, and to find the rest for which the soul longs.⁸

My grandmother used to tell of how as a child she shared in the chores on her parents’ Missouri farm, one of them being plowing behind an old mule. I still laugh when I remember her description of the day they worked the mule so hard that it finally reached the point of utter exhaustion. “You know,” my grandmother used to say, “There’s no good way for a mule to sit down. And that old mule just sort of sprawled out there in front of the plow, as if to say, “That’s it. I’ve had it! I can’t go any further! I gotta rest!”

I had a car that did that once. And several times in my life I have almost done it to myself. There have been some periods of my life when I have spent myself for good causes and with good intentions and with diligence and yet came to the place where I couldn’t go any further...where I didn’t think I could move...where I couldn’t think straight.

Have you been there? Have you ever been there? Are you there right now? If so, Jesus comes, promising rest. He offers us Sabbath. It is a gift... a gift we all need, and a gift we so seldom claim, caught as we are on this “carousel of time.” We need to claim it for ourselves, and we need to make sure that it is available to everyone, including those whom we employ and the poor and oppressed.

Rest is a gift. It is also a practice. And I commend it to you, even as I strive to claim it for myself.

⁸ Elisabeth Johnson.